

Title	Lost Elysium: space as a metaphor for the liminal in a post-Catholic world
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Publication date	2019
Original Citation	O'Donnell, M. E. 2019. Lost Elysium: space as a metaphor for the liminal in a post-Catholic world. PhD Thesis, University College Cork.
Type of publication	Doctoral thesis
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Download date	2023-05-04 16:29:56
Item downloaded from	<a href="http://hdl.handle.net/10468/8926">http://hdl.handle.net/10468/8926</a>

# **LOST ELYSIUM**

**Space as a Metaphor for the Liminal in a Post-Catholic World**

Dissertation submitted in candidacy for the Degree of Doctor of  
Philosophy, School of English, University College Cork, by

Mary O'Donnell

Under the supervision of Dr Éibhear Walshe

Head of the School of English: Professor Lee Jenkins

April, 2019

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## Abstract

This thesis was submitted as part of a PhD by Prior Publication. It explores the motivations for my writing, and examines the formative early experiences, and early artistic habits and reading, in which my life as a writer are rooted. The thesis is divided into two parts, an essay called 'Lost Elysium' and the novel *The Elysium Testament*. Space, belief, and the irrational form the primary themes which underpin the novel. The introduction to the essay forms an objective tracing of my childhood, teenage years and writing (juvenilia), early adulthood and the course of my literary career, the purpose of this being to establish for the reader the conditions that contributed to my becoming a writer, and also the passage of time in which I gradually realised that I could think of myself as a writer. The other sections of the essay relate to the genesis of the novel, an exploration of interior space and different aspects of the liminal as presented in *The Elysium Testament*, and an exploration of exterior environments as sites of transformative power and witness.

**Keywords:** Mary O'Donnell, writer, *The Elysium Testament*, Irish literature, Irish women writers, creative writing, Irish fiction, Irish poetry, Irish short story, illness and artistic practice, *Lupus*, elation, interiors and exteriors.

### **Acknowledgements**

To my parents John and Maureen, the loving foundation on which my early life thrived, who ferried towards me books and conversations which tested boundaries and offered the pathways and prospects that made me love writing. To Margaret, heart-sister. To Anna, kindest and wisest of daughters, heart-capturer, hope-builder. To Éibhear Walshe, my supervisor and a fellow writer, who turned the key in the locked door of my past in more ways than he can ever imagine. And to my darling husband Martin, journeyman, *anamchara* from then to now and onwards, light in my life for over forty-two years.

**Declaration**

I hereby declare that this thesis submitted is my own work and has not been submitted for another degree, either at University College Cork or elsewhere.

Signed:

Mary Elizabeth O'Donnell

Date:

‘ . . . the literary achievement lies in the language which manufactures this psychologically surreal world: *"I watched the shadowy imprint of the sun through the flying fog. It hung like a leaden ball and I thought, this is it. This lamp, ball, light, coalescence, is all there is. When it dies, and when the solar flares stop flaring, so will the seasons. So will we. . ."* And even in Nina's redemption, we remember only her eerie foresight, in this novel of soaring, elegant perception.’

Emer O’Kelly, The Sunday Independent.

## **Lost Elysium**

‘Space as a Metaphor for the Liminal in a post-Catholic world’.

A critical analysis of the novel *The Elysium Testament*, for a Degree of Doctor of Philosophy  
by Independent Research and Publication.

### **1.1. Introduction**

‘It is the phantom of our own Self, whose intimate relationship with, and deep effect upon, our spirit, casts us into hell or transports us into Heaven’.

E. T. A. Hoffmann

I begin to write early in life, penning a rhyming four-line poem at the age of nine. My mother encourages me to send it to the British children’s publisher and director of Octopus Press, Paul Hamlyn. It is a child’s poem concerning a mouse that lives in a house. The language is commonplace. Like most children I have absorbed ideas about rhyming sounds being part of a poem. Paul Hamlyn responds warmly by letter, does not have a ‘niche’ for my poem just then, but urges me to continue to write. This response establishes my early faith in publishing, and from then I think of anything I write only in terms of possible publication. Writing and publishing are linked and alive in my imagination.

Reading is vital. In the 1960s and 1970s, both parents are bookish and relatively progressive. As well as being provided with the staples of Irish myth and legend, the novels of Patricia Lynch and the fantastical James Stephens, I am signed up to monthly membership of the London Children’s Book Club. Although we are practising Catholics, dogma plays no role in the household. I continue to write, and in 1965 I am a prize-winner in a poetry competition organised by the St. Louis Primary School and the local newspaper, *The Northern Standard*.



By age thirteen, I write a different kind of poem—rhyming pastoral quatrains, composed while sprawled in the woods in front of the Norman castle of Bargy, Co. Wexford, a holiday destination. I retreat there when not going to the beach, alone in this green bower with a rapturous feeling of oneness with nature. I reproduce here the exact poem (*Pretty Things*) produced on one such afternoon:

Ivy creeping up the wall,  
Secluded, sheltered places,  
Woods that echo blackbirds' call,  
New and pleasant faces.

Sunset evenings quiet and mellow,  
Daffodils with heads so yellow,  
Cows beneath the sighing trees,  
Ever-busy bumble bees.

Nature gives us things like these,  
Pretty things meant to please  
The tender heart and watchful eye,  
Till Winter makes us bid goodbye.

Later, on reading the poetry of Patrick Kavanagh, I discover that such feelings of identification with nature may be called 'mystical'. For me, mysticism obtains from an underlying thread of the religious, of beliefs outside standard structure but within an attitude of identification with the most minute aspects of the natural world. It also casts me as part of a transcendent and participatory cosmic process in which I feel completely at ease. Others appear to believe themselves centre stage, but to me, are whisperers in the wings, while *I* am invisibly aware of something they have either forgotten or never had access to.

This writing 'I' is the one that undergoes feelings of oneness with existence, and it sweeps through me intermittently throughout my Monaghan childhood. Such feelings give rise to poetry. Only later, when I begin to write fiction, is an awareness of the gap between my social self and my inner self expressed, and some of my protagonists in stories such as 'After

the Match' or 'Halley's Comet', find themselves restrained by a society that does not always respond to their imaginative needs and social beliefs.

By the age of ten, I sense that, when happy, I am happier than most children, but inversely, when unhappy, am unhappier than others. In happiness, I am positive, and capable of influencing friends; in unhappiness, I am capable of destructiveness, of breaking my parents' glass-house, or inscribing family photographs with biro ink, and remain unchecked for this. Essentially, my temperament is developing an uneven manner of coping with life as my aesthetic aspect takes root in the lovely place in which I live; that self is profoundly connected to an appreciation of nature, and becomes linked to my need to write poetry. At the very least, I need to create something, and swing between drawing with pencil and paper outside in the open air, to occasionally composing small piano pieces (one of which I still remember how to play), but the most accessible art form is writing. It needs no particular teacher (so I believe), or equipment, and is therefore accompanied by a tremendous sense of autonomy and a quite secretive intellectual power.

Retrospectively, I believe that some of my destructive activities were responses to the outer chaos—what I perceive as 'chaos' without having that word at my disposal—within our family. The presence of my newly adopted sister, Margaret, has altered the happy mood that defined my life with my parents until then. I am nearly six when she is adopted, and part of the little family party that enthusiastically collects her from the CPRSI in Dublin's South Anne Street. By age eight, I am in the throes of inarticulately observing the difficulties which my mother is experiencing with an infant with whom she does not bond. I am unhappily aware that my new sister is perceived by some of the extended family as somewhat of an 'outsider', different from the rest of the tribe. I retreat to the states and places in which forms

of happiness seemed secure and incontestable: nature, animals, school friends. I feel no jealousy at my sister. I do not need to, because I am clearly a favoured child, and uncomfortably, guiltily, aware of this. I feel helpless.

In a state of happiness, I consider my animal self in an unanalysed way as a parallel but symbiotic part that appreciates nature and wants to compose poetry. When I say ‘animal’, I mean the self that lives separate from school and society, in the country. Later, I define this feeling as ‘authenticity’, and the private realisations that accompany it as ‘original’. It is not that such feelings are unique—because others do experience them—but that I know life to be a teeming, cellular condition to which I am highly attuned. I am tree-climber, dog-racer, girl-on-a-swing, mud-pie maker, field walker, nest seeker and squirrel spotter, tolerant of rats, mice and frogs. This life contrasts with my life as a town child during the week, where I return to my grandmother’s house for dinner and after school. In the town I have the freedom of roaming the streets with school friends or cousins, a physical sense of owning those streets and in particular any derelict buildings, including the disused sanatorium below the mental hospital. The mental hospital looms large locally, and later, will provide some of the more liminal scenes in *The Elysium Testament*.

But home in the country is where I write, and I enjoy solitude. At fifteen, I am given a telescope for Christmas. I spend freezing winter nights outside our hill-situated house with this marvellous gift, focusing on the stars, the moon’s surface, isolating Mars rising over Kilnadrain hill. Later, the sense of moonscape at the time of the Apollo missions, has the effect of joining up the interstices between my *self* in aloneness, and my *self* as a whole being comforted by a sense of the wide universe, of being part of this.

I continue to write poems that are published in the local paper at the age of 12, 13, and 14. A major hiatus occurs with my hospitalisation in autumn 1970 at the age of 16, and although I do write one poem called 'Chrysanthemums' during those four months, I write nothing for a year after. My life is fractured by the experience of hospital, followed by a further two months at home and not at school.

In hospital, I am like a pupa in its cocoon, awaiting transformation. I am considered to be quite ill. In St. Vincent's Hospital, blood and urine tests become a daily feature. Blood pressure is monitored six times daily. A precise diagnosis never emerges at that time for what exactly is wrong, beyond a serious malfunction of blood pressure and kidneys. A young priest enters one evening and prays over me, but although I experience a rush of religious expectation, I also feel like telling him to go away. Eight years later, I attempt to recount that feeling in the poem 'Purge', published in The Irish Press in November 1982:

'Between injections, we spun on pain.  
Dialysis purged our poisons.  
Sick so often we croaked like toads,  
Longed for beds of lilies . . .

. . . Then a man smiled shallowly,  
touched my head—I hoped  
it might be Christ come personally—  
he moved to the next bed,  
fingers fanned like coral shells . . .'

I experience the struggle for health, and witness a few companions in arms die; a girl with Nephritis, another, older woman whose kidneys also fail, and a woman with stomach cancer. Comforts come from my radio set, listening to the Top Twenty late at night and George Harrison's 'My Sweet Lord', and following the path of a crescent moon as it rises over the Hellfire Club mountain, which I can see from my bed. I make friends easily with people of all ages who come and go in St. Anthony's Ward, all in various stages of chronic illness.

In hospital, I begin to read with a serious appetite books ferried in by parents, friends, and my English teacher, attempting to discover as much as possible about life. Titles include Irving Stone's biography of Michaelangelo Buonarroti, *The Agony and the Ecstasy*, also *The Cry and the Covenant*, a biography on the Hungarian physician Ignaz Semmelweis, known for his research into puerperal fever. Both books impress me because of the element of two historically disparate personalities having to resist authority, a position of which I automatically approve, because I do not trust the construction of outer selves offered by society. It does not address the purpose of living, for example, or the purpose of artistic enterprise, yet Michaelangelo's efforts were entirely directed to resist the purse-pinching and disruptive authority of his official patron, Pope Julius II. Likewise, the medical system of the time resisted Semmelweis's insistence on washing hands scrupulously before approaching post-natal patients in order to avoid fatal infection. The fact that most ignored him confirms for me the fact that visionaries and artists are rarely acknowledged in their societies until it is too late.

Yet in hospital, aware that outside, young people my age are coming and going, but that my own school education and friendships have been ruptured, I derive comfort from the worlds created in such literature. I am less alone. It is my first experience of living in a truly liminal way, and having to drop out of school for six months means that, on my return, I never quite reconnect with most of my friends as we head into our Leaving Certificate year. They have moved on and I have moved on, and neither party has any agency to access what the other has been doing.

By age 18 and in my final year in secondary school, our inspirational English teacher Joe Sheridan introduces the class to Hopkins. Like many adolescents of that time, Hopkins's

writing captures my heart, and I produce my own versions of Hopkins-influenced outpouring based on what I observe around me: Monaghan's beautiful Drumlins and evocations of gorse in bloom within the ancient provinces of Oriel and Breffni find their way into my verse. Hopkins reveals the mystical passion in nature. He is ardent, and so am I. Examples of unfinished verse from this period would include the following:

Look here, look here,  
Is this the man they said  
Was dead now?  
Man, he liveth!  
In his purple, vermillion,  
Marigold-flavoured earth.  
Mother! What now!

In another fragment, despair comes from studying Hopkins's 'terrible' sonnets:

My soul,  
my very soul  
is empty;  
O, too full of stored thoughts  
and chill,  
and me!  
Can I too not share  
human heart?

Yet again:

The glory of God is in the land;  
In wind-thrown turbulence  
He stirs the frozen blood of life,  
Throttling tight-lipped gorse  
To burst in yellow merriment.  
Earth's horny crust now softens  
And is fertile,  
For His tears have fallen.  
The eternal heart is bleeding  
Life unto the Earth—  
--it magnifies His glory!  
[MOD 13/2/72]

My sense of myself is vital despite the lack of physical energy that accompanies my illness, on top of the new realignment of school friendships. Despite that, I am once again alive to the sensory world. A diary extract from 10<sup>th</sup> April 1972 describes the following:

‘ . . . I never feel at ease at any functions or dances. Yet there’s no place else to go . . . All we ever discuss is who’s going with who . . . and how long it’s going to last. Yet it’s a lovely day and I mustn’t grumble. I really love the Monaghan country . . . there’s a wildness in these Drumlin hills. It’s a strange beauty – not the ravaged beauty of Mayo or Donegal, no, it’s a unique loveliness. Sometimes it’s difficult to distinguish between cloud and hill, so obscure are the nuances of blue and purple. And the loveliest, most vibrant thing in the hills is the gorse! The wonderful colour just explodes in the field above the house. Later on comes the heather, though not around us—up in Bragan, where the land is boggy, the heather is alive with bees. . . All this is God—every cell of every living thing has God within.’

At times I have forgotten the fact that I held a strong belief in the presence of a God, that I did pray, often, to the presence I had most access to in the natural world. But the God that I pray to then borrows something from the God who looks down from the skies, whereas that God today is a cellular presence in nature, that I can enter privately.

In keeping with that period in the 1970s, the word ‘creative’ doesn’t feature much at school, although the St. Louis nuns are gifted teachers of the arts, especially music and choral work, both of which I enjoy. But it is the era of the polemic essay, and, scarcely knowing how to articulate my nascent views on politics—especially on the turbulent North just six miles away—I fare better at imaginative work. The combination of an appetite for reading and a quietly oppositional temperament, ensure that I acquire a questioning attitude towards social authority, in school and elsewhere. While not vocal, I think a lot about the artist’s relationship with life—some of this derived from curricular reading, especially Hemingway, who provides a fair model of a resisting artist intent on his artistic goals, which include a writer’s authority.

‘Originality’ and ‘authenticity’ are linked in my mind from my teen years, and even interchangeable. I have an unchallenged belief that to live authentically means to live in a state of freedom to put private belief into practice, to enjoy political freedom, to enjoy the pursuit of art as a means of making sense of existence and the pleasure of creation. To

compound that, every character I have ever created—including my protagonist Nina in the novel under discussion in this essay—is underpinned by my sense that no matter how outwardly ordinary and compromised they are, they must be revealed to be more challenging and different than what passes for ‘normal’, in order to reflect originality and authenticity.

At university, in Maynooth from 1974, my honours degree subjects are German and Philosophy. I write a little throughout my time there, but without direction. I owe a great deal to that period of having time to read the greater German writers, to undertake a study of German anti-Semitic literature published during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and to absorb the work of playwrights like Brecht, Dürrenmatt and Büchner. Without any life experience, reading ferries a knowledge of things I have no other means of discovering: subjects such as unusual geographical terrains, 19<sup>th</sup> century European history, sex, love, how to handle *feelings*.

Ireland’s conversationally repressed society is not always nourishing. I have felt like live bait since the age of twelve, and often find the interaction with boys as awkward as I am myself, an inconvenience. There are few forums for ideas, for irreverence beyond the crudest forms (lewd jokes and double entendres flourished after I disseminate parts of Mary McCarthy’s *The Group*).

Focused writing finally begins a few years after university, in 1982. First encouragement comes from David Marcus, editor of New Irish Writing in *The Irish Press*, who publishes an uncollected early poem, ‘Calderstone Trial’. Its subject is a group of mentally challenged patients who become a British news item when they (successfully) seek the right to vote in local elections:

The lunatics want to vote.  
Laughter.



There's a hearing today.  
Jaws drop.

England burns with indignation.  
Urination in the streets!  
Promiscuity on our wayfares!  
The bus awaits the inmates.  
Some totter, some are steered.  
Others jerk, moved by  
A trickster puppeteer.  
Woman clings to a doll,  
Child that was never born.  
This man's mouth dribbles,  
Spiteful condemnation of his case.  
In court, a young man questions.  
The jury listen safely.  
Words explode like shrapnel  
From the twitching spastic,  
A girl's head rotates like  
A loose ball-bearing,  
A case is driven in pain,  
Sketched in decrepitude,  
Silhouetted in delusion.  
The Pariah of humanity  
Invades the court today,  
Litters the solemn benches,  
Sits askance in wheelchairs,  
Rejects the husks of charity,  
Demands a four-course meal.

The lunatics want to vote.  
Laughter.  
The hearing was yesterday.  
Jaws drop.

The poem focuses on the struggle of those who are liminal, to enter a normative space.

Liminality is to become a familiar, underlying, and sometimes overt, preoccupation in my future writing. I have already experienced liminality myself, through illness and non-participation in my social group at school. This publication proves encouraging enough for me to decide to pursue a life of writing and Mr. Marcus continues to accept pieces of prose and poetry over the next eight years.

I also begin to read the work of psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich, especially his *Character Analysis*. In this work, he asserts that every human attitude is the functional expression of a physiological process. This lies vaguely at the back of my mind as *The Elysium Testament* unfolds, and I begin to examine the idea that if my protagonist Nina suddenly encounters a powerful experience, with which she must struggle and be either defeated or redeemed, that I can apply my own Reichian-influenced ideas: through her 'testament' or diary, the reader discovers Nina's emotional armour, the result of childhood trauma which she, Nina, must resolve in order to achieve an outcome that is neither nihilistic nor hopeless.

After Maynooth university, being married and mortgaged, and the economy in depression during the 1980s, I am employed in temporary jobs, including with Loktite Glue as a telex operator and with Lyons Tea. Another employment is with the accountancy firm Stokes, Kennedy Crowley. I travel by bus from Maynooth to the city centre, then walk to grey-bricked Harcourt Street and head office. What I observe is that the higher up the social spectrum an employer or group of employers believes themselves to be, the more gendered the attitudes which accompany their staff. I find myself in an over-perfumed women's dictating office with a fashionably dressed group whose ambition is apparently to marry an accountant. They are unfriendly, dump extra work on temps, and for a long time afterwards, every time I pass that premises I feel like lobbing a rock through the front window.

That I often feel anger at the position of my societal self during those years is undoubted. Young people, and young women in particular, are affected by the prevailing social structures that frame working and private life. My private goal is to bring the pragmatic aspects of my life into a manageable configuration that will not interfere too much with creative aspiration. I imagine this to be happening when I win second place in Listowel Writers' Week Poetry

competition in 1982, and immediately spend the prize money on two abstract expressionist lithographs from the Venice Biennale, which I justify to myself as more important than contributing to loosening the monthly mortgage noose from around our necks.

I am invited, along with the other prize-winners, to read my poem publicly. I am nervous, but gain confidence when I spot an Irish-American within that audience who interviewed me a year beforehand for the position of secretary. Although he wanted to employ me, he openly said he could only pay me three months *after* I began work. Incredulous, I refused the job, while he, incredulous that I could turn it down, warned that I would still be working in Loctite Glue in five years' time. Such is the era, but now, in Listowel, a small victory hoves in view. My poem. Him listening. A life in writing already begun.

As secretary to the MD of Jacob's Biscuits on Belgard Road, Dublin, I actually find time to write in spring 1983. My employer has a remarkably small amount of correspondence to attend to, is calm and self-possessed. In between organising board meetings, or typing up the Financial Director's accounts, I am able to write in that office, beneath a representative selection of Theo McNab paintings that belong to the then Chairman of the company, the well-known collector Gordon Lambert. This brings the air of a gallery to the very large outer office space, while, below us in the factory, cream crackers are pressed into existence. That spring, I sense wider spaces in which to flourish. I attend book launches and readings in the evenings. Sometimes I am asked to read my work. This signals to me the fruitfulness of paying attention to creative life, that there are others like me, who will read, listen and experiment. I am coming into my own territory of vistas, which I imagine I will be eternally free to explore.

In that office, I feel like Alexander Selkirk, or Patrick Kavanagh, who references Selkirk in his poem 'Inniskeen Road: July Evening' ('Oh Alexander Selkirk knew the plight /of being king and government and nation . . .'). In Kavanagh's case, his choice is to be commentator, not participator, a position which inevitably leads to isolation and solitude. Every time I sit down to write, I sometimes experience a sense of great fortune, especially as poems and stories are being published. I am eventually shortlisted for a Hennessy Literary Award, a thrilling validation. Slowly, the gap narrows between the world of daily conformity and mortgage paying, and the desire for a world of imagination and creativity.

Many jobs later, including teaching for three years in a Dublin girls' secondary school, and working as The Sunday Tribune's Drama Critic for three years, first book publication arrives in 1990 with the poetry collection *Reading the Sunflowers in September*, followed in 1991 with the Poolbeg Press collection of short stories, *Strong Pagans*. The poetry collection is nominated for an Irish Times Literature Award; this success is repeated in 1993 with a second poetry collection, *Spiderwoman's Third Avenue Rhapsody*.

I recollect uneasily now, how I almost take such recognitions for granted, as if they are my due. How can that be, the older me enquires, such lack of humility? How can it be, that a mere eight years beforehand, I am faltering my way towards a life in writing, with absolutely no certainty of the value of the work. Admittedly, I now move in journalistic and theatre circles, where a sense of entitlement is not exactly unknown, but perhaps it is less an absence of humility and more a naïve belief that the world will understand what I am doing as a writer.

In 1992, a crisis of authorship follows the publication of my first novel, *The Light Makers*. This novel opens a new literary space for me (that of novels and agents, rather than poets) and includes themes to which I will later return in the novel under consideration, in that it foreshadows a long held interest in architecture and the spaces in which humans enact their private dramas. I am afraid of being ‘caught out as not a genuine novelist. Poetry, even short stories, are one thing. To write and publish a novel and join the legions of novelists, quite another.

The 1990s are productive. In 1993, I give birth to a daughter at the height of massive publicity for *The Light Makers*, including an ill-played appearance on RTE television’s Late Late Show. During this, Lesley Kenton, Polly Devlin, and I, are introduced to discuss the theme ‘Sex in Literature’. The audience is lively and finds everything about us hilarious. Our writing—our literary *voices*—are not discussed, and there is a raw, insinuation-filled atmosphere.

Too soon after the birth of my daughter, encouragement from Poolbeg Press to produce another novel becomes a pressure. I work distractedly due to deteriorating health and body pain. My most emotionally true work that year consists of *poems* written in the newly published collection *Spiderwoman’s Third Avenue Rhapsody*, the ‘Eve’ poems, in response to my personal changes in circumstance as a mother. In the months after birth, I once again feel flooded by feelings of love and oneness with the universe, a situation not as healthy as it might sound, and very far removed from the transcendence I knew when younger, and which later leads to difficulties.

Books published during that decade include the novel *Virgin and the Boy*, a third collection of poetry, *Unlegendary Heroes*, again from Salmon, and the novel under discussion in this essay, *The Elysium Testament* (hereafter referred to as ‘ET’). This moving between genres reflects confidence on my part, and it has never been possible to confine myself to one genre alone. It comes naturally, as a means of tilting at different forms of expression.

By the time I begin to write ET, I am a seasoned writer and recipient of several awards, and many literary reviews. The exceptionally well-received ET draws on my deepening sense of the tectonic disruption that can occur between inner and outer worlds in one character, something I have been acquainted with since my teen years.

The nine-year-old girl of 1963 who rhymes ‘mouse’ with ‘house’, who felt like a pupa awaiting growth and release from a rigid cocoon, becomes a forty-five-year-old woman able to spread her wings enough to publish eight books in the period 1990-1999, leading to ET. With this novel, my imaginative ambitions and needs are satisfactorily realised at this point in my life.

## 1.2. Genesis of the Novel

This essay explores the ET in the light of space, of belief, and of the irrational. In this sense, characters struggle against social norms and find their own quest for a philosophical female good challenged.

Preceding that however, I looked to Greek mythology, and Elysium (or the Elysian Fields), the place of the blessed dead and the paradise to which heroes on whom the gods conferred immortality were sent. In the novel under discussion, it represents two spaces: the local, interior architectural space of the protagonist's home, named 'Elysium', and the interior architectural space of a grotto also known as 'Elysium'. The difference between them—one domestic, and the other holding suggestions of infinity—is part of this essay's discussion.

The events and incidents in ET are set down by its desperate and lonely protagonist Nina in her diary or 'testament', between October 31<sup>st</sup> and December 9<sup>th</sup>. The book describes what happens when Nina and Neil, a modern, secular, middle-class Irish family encounters in their son Roland evidence of 'saintly' tendencies, or at the very least, behaviour which falls beyond the ambit of what the socially aspiring classes consider as 'normal'. That his behaviours take place within certain spaces are of interest to me for the purposes of this essay, in which architecture and structure will be revealed as spaces in which the irrational and the liminal sometimes find expression in today's post-religious world.

Several background strands lead to the moment when I began writing the first pages of ET: on 12 February, 1993, my infant daughter was three weeks old. On that day, the toddler Jamie Bulger was murdered by two impoverished young boys in Liverpool. The boys – Jon

Venables and Robert Thompson – were sentenced to eight years in Preston Crown Court in November 1993. This case played on my mind at a time when the protection of an infant was my greatest concern. Furthermore, diminished energies, thanks to the flare-up of an undiagnosed health condition (which had caused my hospitalisation many years before), contributed to feelings of despair in the face of what I perceived to be an attack on innocence.

Questions regarding the nature of innocence and evil were of increasing concern, as well as a deepening attention to my own psychological dysfunction. I experienced post-natal elation (rather than depression), and rather than be treated for this, I distracted myself with things that interested me, among them Schubert's music, Annie Lennox songs, David Bowie's *Aladdin Sane*—and collecting quartzes. Throughout, part of me remained entirely rational, even while gripped by a powerful inner excitement. I think of this retrospectively as casting a searchlight outside the self for something that was occurring within the self, as in *my* self.

After reading 'Second Opinion', an article by Dr. Tony Smith in *The Independent on Sunday*, I made notes on Heutoscopy, or Doppelgänger Syndrome. Dr. Smith provided a brief history of the syndrome's appearance, especially in literary history, from Edgar Allen Poe to Dostoyevsky. According to him, the syndrome of subjective doubles is a rare delusional misidentification syndrome in which a person experiences the delusion that he or she has a double with an identical appearance, but usually with threatening character traits, leading an independent life of its own.



Otto Rank in his classic work *Double: Psychoanalytic Study* quotes the character Ivan Karamasov, before whom the devil has appeared as his double. Karamasov resists the reality of the double and announces:

‘You are a lie, a disease, a phantom . . . You are the incarnation of myself; but at that, only of one side of me . . . of my thoughts and feelings, but only of the most hideous and stupid ones . . .’ (Rank, *Double: A Psychoanalytic Study*. p. 13)

Of particular interest to me as author of ET is the fact that the only victim of Doppelgänger Syndrome is the five-year old child, Roland, himself incapable of wickedness of any kind. So who is the real generator of whatever is ugly or ill-formed within this child’s life? After writing two drafts of the novel, I could look solely in one direction, towards my character Nina, (Roland’s mother), herself the survivor of unresolved childhood trauma. Roland, she suggests, has an implied condition inherited from her. She admits the following:

‘I passed something on to Roland, something I never told even you, could hardly admit to myself.’ (ET:105)

Prior to this she speaks of the possibility of having her own gospel to write, and describes its credos, among them:

‘. . . the right for everybody to discover beauty, the right to turn from what was not satisfying, beautiful or good. If necessary, the right to enter a trance and live off, if not actually walk on, air . . .’. (ET:107)

The child’s activities may be viewed as a manifestation of the mother’s repressed childhood experience: her emotional fracture by a verbally abusive father, self-alienation after the death of her mother, and crucially, visions she experiences on one occasion when forced to dive into a swimming pool in the local mental hospital.

In the same month I began to write ET (October 1994), I received a medical diagnosis that I had the auto-immune condition Lupus (Systemic Lupus Erythematosus). The experience of inflammation of my connective tissue since the birth of my daughter meant that I was in constant pain in bones, joints and tendons. Compounding this, I had simultaneously been concealing feelings of over-elation—in themselves quite serious—and avoided therapy on the grounds that I interpreted these wildly happy feelings in a positive light, despite acute physical pain. They also included a fixation on the obstetrician who delivered my daughter, with whom I believed I had formed a bond. Months later, these feelings finally subsided. But I did not feel safe. I sometimes believed I was dying in the same breath as I believed I was in love. The discovery of how pain can give rise to ideas which are not the case in reality was frightening. I suspected my sanity, and the diagnosis of Lupus was a further threat.

The only person I was aware of who had had this condition was the writer Flannery O'Connor, and she died from it. The wife of a writer I knew had also died from its effects. I felt frightened by the diagnosis, but steroid medication provided some immediate symptomatic relief, and an opportunity to retrench. In a letter to Elizabeth and Robert Lowell in 1953, she wrote 'I have enough energy to write with and as that is all I have any business doing anyhow, I can with one eye squinted take it all as a blessing. What you have to measure out, you come to observe closer, or so I tell myself.' (O'Connor, Flannery. *The Habit of Being*, 17<sup>th</sup> March, 1953, p.57). Eleven years later, in a letter to another friend, her remarks are less optimistic: 'I'm in stir as the criminals say. That operation or its aftermath kicked up the lupus for me . . . [P.S.] Prayers requested. I am sick of being sick.' (O'Connor, Flannery. *The Habit of Being*, 28<sup>th</sup> May, 1964, p.581).

After diagnosis, I commenced a swimming programme to maintain physical strength, and drove to Clondalkin three times a week to the town swimming pool, often praying to myself in the silence of deep water, holding my breath for longer and longer periods as I did the breast-stroke but kept my head immersed. Unlike my character Nina, who is forced to swim by her father, I have always experienced swimming as a healing process.

Around this time, I learned of a local woman in my area whose child died after being impaled on a gate. I occasionally encountered this woman, and was struck by her outward ‘normality’. I wondered how people carry on in the face of unspeakable events, given that I was struggling to hold my outward balance myself. Although the idea for a novel which would focus on a similar unspeakable event had not entirely crystallised, I began to see a way towards some new writing that seemed urgent.

I thought of myself as a psychologically bifurcated human, one part attending to the functional aspect of home-dwelling, parenting, being a wife, another part—the Lupus part—drawn to another self in which spectres and aberrant witnessing occurred. I felt less threatened, more determined.

In what Susan Sontag refers to as the ‘kingdom of the sick’, values are different. Sontag describes illness as ‘the night-side of life’ (Sontag, 3). She also remarks that ‘it is hardly possible to take up one’s residence in the kingdom of the ill unprejudiced by the lurid metaphors with which it has been landscaped’ (Sontag, 3). I came with a preconception of what Lupus was, imagining myself developing a wolf-like facial skin-mask, night anxieties and a decline into madness. I was wrong. Illness is not a separate entity with hermetic boundaries, but is liminal, shape-changing in its manifestations, and is the active underbelly

to our most normal daily performances. This is echoed in my character Nina's life, where she is seen to attend to domestic matters, but her attention fixates with some aggression on her son's invisible spectres and levitations, as well as her obsessive pleasure at her achievements in the Elysian grotto.

During preceding months, I began to collect certain items – pieces of quartz, shells – and to save newspaper articles relating to the follies and grottoes designed by wealthy Victorians to enhance their demesnes. In August 1994, I purchased *Follies and Grottoes*, by Barbara Jones, a study of the early Victorian leisured classes and how they experimented with architecture.

That reading, and the local presence of Co Kildare's Carton and Castletown demesnes, both with follies, served as a resource for ET, in which architectural restorer Nina is commissioned to restore a 19<sup>th</sup> century 'fake' grotto, known as the Elysian Grotto. She is a perfectionist who pursues her own idea of authenticity, originality, and wholeness. Her attitude towards work and her choice of materials is influenced by Andrea Palladio, but is not dissimilar to that other creative Italian, Michaelangelo Buonarrotti, mentioned in the Introduction to this essay in connection with Irvine Stone's *The Agony and the Ecstasy*. Stone describes Michaelangelo's approach to the Sistine Chapel ceiling:

'Through sheer invention he must transform the ceiling, utilizing its shortcomings . . . to force his creative powers into channels they might not otherwise have taken. Either he was the stronger, and could displace this vault space, or the force of the vault to resist would crush him' (Stone, 517)

In a similar spirit, upon receiving her commission, Nina enquires:

‘To create a grotto, to take that one courageous step and enter such a place, means being in love with opposites. I was and still am. With architecture, which signifies order, and with organic forces signifying chaos . . . But [. . .] what could we not do with it, what could we not transform to make visitors enjoy the distance between outside and inside, between reality and illusion between nature and art?’ (ET, 75)

From the opening chapter (October 31), Nina is estranged from dentist-husband Neil. Their second child, Roland, suffers from what today is registered as neurological hallucinatory disturbance—previously referred to as Heutoscopy. In ET it is not defined unequivocally as an hallucination until late in the novel, when Nina forces herself to write it out.

‘A Doppelgänger is an exact double of oneself, seen during normal consciousness. When the doctors pieced together the patterns . . . they concluded that Roland was a sufferer.’ (ET,199)

Not alone burdened with Doppelgänger Syndrome, Roland is first seen to levitate by his mother in a quiet supermarket aisle one day. Nina, whose own mother died when she was young, leaving her in the care of a well-meaning but domineering father, is uncontrollably angered and disturbed. She reacts by later assaulting her son (hitting him with a packet of salmon), and to repeat such abuse on many occasions in an attempt to ‘knock that out of him if it was the last thing I did.’ (ET, 112)

Nina and her twin brother Hugon share a mirrored experience of having been parented by a father who struggled, despite good intentions. Hugon, outwardly the ‘logical’ one, is, like Nina, trained to the professions. Nina’s relationship with him reflects double idioms. Firstly, they are non-identical twins, and therefore *split* doubles in appearance from conception

onwards. Although they do not communicate very well, 'Childhood having silenced us both, my twin and I have never had a great deal to say to one another in words, as much as looks.' (ET:136), nonetheless, both share an obsessive attitude to achievement. Hugon is justifiably upset when Roland has interfered with his laptop and wiped all the information off it. Even so, he attempts to remain calm:

'Hugon was precise and to the point, spoke in lists, his voice wavering with fury and righteousness.' (ET, 156)

Nina's response to this displays evidence of a lifetime's narcissistic lack of sensitivity to the needs of others:

'He'll manage . . . He has always managed.' (ET, 157)

Like Nina, Hugon may be more emotionally vulnerable than he at first appears. This is confirmed by his wife Fran's remark about 'poor Hugon', and her desire for him to work with a cognitive therapist.

Nina sometimes refers to Christian, or specifically Catholic imagery, borne from childhood memory. It is as if, despite secularism and free thinking, the 'then' of her childhood held positive aspects which supported her.

Nina also experienced a Catholic girlhood, and finding solace at Church grottos. In her diary entry of November 13, she recounts how grottos were places of 'religious worship', but goes on to remark that there is a memory in all of us of 'the mythic double of these real-life religious ones, of afternoons in green, languid glades when we honoured *the animal-god*, when we felt the hairy haunches of a goat in the lower half of our bodies.' (ET, 61)

She has also lived an emotionally conflicted life as a child. Her father, desperately attempting to rear his children after their mother's death, pursues a programmatic style of child-rearing. The corollary of that is evident in Nina's three underwater visions, after diving into the local swimming-pool. That this pool is set within the grounds of the local psychiatric hospital offers a further avenue to the recognition that Nina's other life – perhaps implicitly her 'true' life – is unfolding in a different dimension to that imagined by her father. In fact, Nina feels emotional distance from him throughout, and we witness her sense of comforted oneness *only* when she experiences a vision of her mother.

Nina has not one, but two empathisers. Her work colleague, Dr Ciaran McElligot (with whom she has a sexual relationship) suffers from *grand mal* epilepsy, and McElligot may be viewed as occupying a beneficent liminal space in her life. Her other empathiser is the psychiatrist John Holmes, whom Neil and Nina visit for advice. Holmes is described as a 'college buddy' of Neil's (ET, 36). A friendship develops between him and Nina. Understanding of mental illness and social dysfunction, he attempts to establish a 'half-way house' for his patients, but meets with community resistance. Later, he confides his professional dilemmas to Nina. Holmes's initial questioning of Nina and Neil implies *sexual* abuse (ET, 38). Although physical abuse is raised at this point in the novel, what is not discussed is the possibility of sexual abuse. However, physical beatings and mistreatment, *not* sexual abuse, express Nina's secretive and darkened maternity.

As an epilepsy sufferer, Ciaran is aware of the interstices between the non-liminal and liminal. He also acts as a foil in the context of the increasingly troubled relationship between Nina and disbelieving husband Neil, the latter not having witnessed any of Roland's levitation episodes. A sufferer himself of a phenomenon which society finds difficult to

understand, Ciaran validates, and more importantly *accepts* Roland's as yet undiagnosed condition. Significantly, it is he, and not Neil or Nina, who reaches out to the child at the party held by the couple on a warm August night, where Roland levitates down from the apple tree.

In her diary entry for November 25, Nina recounts observing Roland's 'double' during an episode in which he levitates on the window-ledge outside his bedroom:

'For a moment, I thought I glimpsed another face staring out, a mirror image of his own except that it was lower down, as if the other child stood inside on the floor of the bedroom, watching, goading.' (ET, 117).

Unlike her earlier violence towards the child when she first saw him levitating in the supermarket aisle, on this occasion she is so shocked by the vision that she vomits.

Nina, drawn continually to identify with Christian idioms, then constructs a parallel between her sense of shock and that which might have struck those who witnessed the Transfiguration of Christ. As he levitates, Roland smiles down at her and waves. Nina remarks that 'Christ probably smiled too.' (ET, 117).



### 1.3. Interior Spaces and the Light and Dark of Liminality

Elysium, the home which Neil and Nina restore, represents interior space. The house is dishevelled, spacious, with a large back garden that slopes down to the river. Nina has a distinct and happy response to the repainting of her home, the environment in which many of the novel's manifestations take place.

Later, when working on the Elysian Grotto, she admits to beginning each day by reading from Palladio. She refers to his work on several occasions, sometimes to ameliorate feelings of disorder, distress and confusion, and at other times to illustrate the profound pleasure she derives from restoration:

‘He is to architecture what Shakespeare became to the English language.’ (ET, 31).

The liberal interaction between Nina and Neil is arguably typical of a couple who have emerged from a repressive society which prioritised rubric-laden religious practice over humane social interaction. In depicting some of the novel's sexual scenes, I was influenced by Wilhelm Reich's idea of what he termed ‘full orgiastic potency’ (Reich, 122). According to Reich, sexual energy governs the structure of human feeling and thinking, and I wanted to portray both Nina and Neil as relatively free of what Reich terms ‘incestual fixation and infantile sexual anxiety’ but with a full capacity for what he calls ‘affirmation of sexuality and *joie de vivre*’.

On a number of occasions Nina has sex, both with her husband, and with her lover Ciaran. There is a desperation to these activities, as if these are attempts by her to be freed from

unspecified burdens. Another view finds parallels in Nietzsche's work *The Birth of Tragedy*.

The philosopher describes the 'satyr' as:

'the archetype of man, the embodiment of his highest and most intense emotions'

(Nietzsche, 61)

Nina, it may be seen, has her own satyr aspect, that is also freely fulfilled.

Within the house, episodes of a version of family life unfold, but on another level the narrative of witness of something highly unusual suggests an inner life for Roland to which Nina has no access. Roland's bedroom is the interior space in which liminal things occur. It may also be viewed as an interior within an interior, which contains an unacknowledged narrative of Roland's life to which his mother fails to respond. This is the space in which he most frequently feels hunted and observed by his 'Other', his Doppelgänger. A third element to what happens in his room is Roland's building of altars, small constructions intended to emulate Nina's grotto constructions, and these gradually lead Nina to consider the idea of signs of 'sainthood'.

The grotto of Elysium is another interior space, but experienced on an entirely different register to Nina's home, Elysium. The two sites – house and grotto – represent an opposed double. Both are interiors but in the grotto she experiences perfection; she also experiences an erotic relationship with her colleague Ciaran (Eros); and she encounters the death of her son just at the moment when she believes she and Roland have finally found perfect emotional unity (Thanatos).

The Elysian Grotto, representing a Greek ideal of a place for the blessed dead, is also the site where the double-sided Nietzschean concepts of the Dionysian and Apollinian find

expression. According to Nietzsche in *The Birth of Tragedy*, what we assume to be culture may in fact be what he calls ‘a lie’, and that includes all the visual art, churches, and buildings which cultured people admire. There appears to be a link between the taught reality of childhood Catholic teaching, with its ideas of a ‘suffering’, Christian Christ, and the (to her) powerful reality of a pagan underworld which includes satyrs, as well as sex in unusual places. Again, referring to Nietzsche, the satyr is described as:

‘ . . . the ecstatic reveller enraptured by the proximity of his god, the sympathetic companion *in whom the suffering of the god is repeated* [my italics], one who proclaims wisdom from the very heart of nature, a symbol of the sexual omnipotence of nature . . . ’

If it is accepted that three of the novel’s characters – Nina, Roland, and her epileptic lover Ciaran – experience the world liminally, they are balanced by three characters whose experience of the world is the opposite: Elinore, Neil, and Bernie the housekeeper. Roland’s watchful elder sister Elinore, witness to so much but too young to articulate it, is grounded in a normative world. Nina’s husband Neil, lives at a remove within his world of professional dentistry. The housekeeper Bernie, whose role, like that of Elinore, is to bear witness, recognises the extreme behaviours in the household, yet is unable to fully articulate her sense of discomfort, beyond remarking ‘I dunno what yis are at half the time in this house,’ (ET:135).

One can extrapolate contradictory evidence within *The Elysium Testament* by examining the behaviour of the three people within Roland’s life who are rational, fully sane, and pragmatic. Elinore, Neil, and Bernie, undoubtedly love the child, with Elinore playing a significant role in attempting to seek help by writing letters to an Agony Aunt. All three prove ineffective

when it comes to stopping Nina's behaviour towards her son. Authoritarian experience that ranges from strictness to outright brutalisation and abuse often occurs within interior spaces – in the home, for example—but in the home, it is covert and hidden, its effects half-witnessed by rational people who sometimes fail to disclose what they suspect.

After Roland's birth, Nina remarks that Neil monitored her, checking and rechecking that bottles were properly sterilised, that nappy-rash didn't develop.' This raises the question of trust, and suggests that Neil may not have entirely trusted his wife. It is significant that directly after witnessing her son undergo another Doppelgänger episode while she is present in his bedroom, she nonetheless decides to postpone seeking help and advice from a psychologist until after the completion of the grotto. She remarks:

'We [Nina and Neil] did not speak again of the incident . . . For days, we scarcely saw one another for more than a few minutes last thing at night. Ciaran and I had reached the final stages of the restoration . . . I'd decided that we should take Roland to a psychologist after it was complete.' (ET:161)

Within the interior space of the home and of Roland's bedroom, Nina expresses ambivalent feelings towards her son. That he does not conform to normative juvenile behaviour frustrates her. He awakens internalised feelings from her childhood: unnamed pain in relation to the totalitarian father who forces her to dive when she is unwilling to, who goads and name-calls, and where she experiences visions of her dead mother. In adult life, what she has witnessed but suppressed emerges in an extreme absence of self-control towards her child.

The one figure who continues to challenge Nina's behaviour is her lover/colleague Ciaran. On one occasion he confides his childhood observation of a local paedophile in his home

area. In so doing, the conversation between him and Nina tilts towards the notion of the unuttered, which Nina attempts to moderate and Ciaran dismisses.

‘He was all talk. But it was scarey. And we knew never to go there alone. We just knew, though nobody said anything.’

‘ . . . Grown-ups saw nothing, did nothing.’[Nina]

‘And sometimes they saw something and they still did nothing,’ Ciaran said.

‘In their own way, they were doing their best,’ I said automatically.

‘Not good enough, Nina. Not fucking good enough. Can’t let yourself off the hook that easily.’ (ET:163)

#### 1.4. Exterior Environments in a Double Role

(i): *The Exterior as a Transformative Space*

Space is where everything we experience occurs. This can mean the interior space of the human body, or the interior space of a home we live in. Interior space offers the possibility of isolation, privacy, but also of *secrecy*. As an extension to the idea of secrecy, ‘secret’ and unusual phenomena are sometimes witnessed in a socially acceptable and outwardly rational environment to which a journey or trip is made, an entering out into the exterior, sometimes only to *re-enter* another interior. An example of this within the novel is the psychiatrist John Holmes’s consulting room and the hospital in which he works. This is a medically sanctioned site of healing, at a socially sanctioned remove from society. Some who inhabit such spaces are occasionally misunderstood for their talk of visions and strong sense of identification with the transcendent. The people who mediate with such patients witness alternative psychological tendencies that they must accept within permitted frameworks. They do not resist, so much as assist and possibly bring to resolution.

Much later in the novel, when Elinore angrily confronts her mother on her brother’s life and death, she refers to a very different, punitive, space she would have wished for Nina, exterior to her home but entirely hermetic:

‘Have you heard a word I said? You should have been reported.’ (ET, 204)

And then:

‘You should be in jail.’ (ET, 204)

Elinore’s fifth letter to the Agony Aunt, later read by Nina, confirms her desperation:

‘I’d run away if it wasn’t for my brother, but he needs me. Sometimes I think I should take something. It’s dead easy to get stuff, anything I want, right outside the school . . .’ (ET, 205).

In her testament, Nina desperately trawls up consoling memories, among them that of the exterior space of the Corpus Christ processions of her childhood. She describes its effect as follows:

‘The scent of the streets was sweet . . . Everything was floral, colourful, overwhelmed us with the odour of sanctity and a sense of comforting permanence. But nothing is permanent. Nor should it be.’ (ET, 69)

As a child in thrall to beauty, Nina inclines towards situations which remove her from the scout-like efficiency of her father’s upbringing. Well-intentioned, (he presents her with a pack of sanitary towels wrapped with ribbon when she begins to menstruate), he remains more focused on physical health and achievement than on his children’s interior lives.

Paradoxically, Nina’s third and final dive at the local mental hospital pool, another exterior space, is partially healing and partially prescient. The underwater vision of her mother is different now:

‘It was my one and only painless dive. This time, the familiar glide beneath the water was highly pleasurable; my ears absorbed the stifled, watery weight, without feeling it as pressure.’ (ET, 167)

She also recalls the following:

‘By her side swam a small boy, naked and white, with slanted eyes and plump hands; his penis floated out from him like a shrimp. There was a strawberry mark on his forehead.’ (ET, 167)

Without knowing it, Nina is witnessing something of her own future in the vision of the child, benignly accompanied by Nina’s dead mother. This is the evening on which Nina’s first menstruation occurs, and the combination of the vision and this natural event represents her transition into an as yet unlived future. Water continues to play a healing role when, in the novel’s closing page, the river becomes an *exterior* space which enables Nina to finally find resolution, even peace of mind.

(ii): *The Exterior as a site of Witness and Redemption*

The unacknowledged family trauma is exposed through several transformative exchanges when Neil and Nina host a summer garden party. Nina later writes:

‘The terror of age came in hot pursuit of us that night, just when we least expected it. Just when we decided that . . . we could snap our fingers and party as of old . . . the body of our daughter reminded us of final moments.’ (ET, 139)

Nina and Neil are struggling to maintain a veneer of youthfulness, and in their midst a tanned fourteen-year old daughter dresses in a grass skirt with coconut shells across her breasts. While her parents enact social ritual, their son—dressed as mythic hero Cuchulainn—is about to demonstrate two things, one of them a levitation which the guests will witness, the other, his avoidance of his own bedroom for fear of seeing his Doppelgänger. Unlike Narcissus in



the Ovidian fable, and unlike Oscar Wilde's *Dorian Grey*, the phenomenon of the Double is not in Roland's case rooted in love of self so much as undiagnosed temporal epilepsy.

However, like both Ovid and Wilde, if one removes what Otto Rank in *Double: A Psychoanalytic Study* calls 'the theme of self-love' (69) from the equation, we are left with the theme of annihilation—or death—as a foreshadowing element.

The party as described by Nina takes place within the lush exterior space of the garden. Neil openly confronts Nina about her affair with Ciaran:

'... A man likes to trust his wife. To feel he can trust her, no matter what sneaky little wimp she has to work with.'

'Please, Neil. Calm down.'

'CALM DOWN? Are you serious?' you bellowed. (ET, 140)

Two hours later, Ciaran and Nina argue because of the former's disapproval of the gathering. The couple slip away further down the garden, and he unleashes his feelings about the party-goers, during which Nina confronts him on his Northern Irish origins:

'We middle-class *Free Staters* haven't suffered enough for the likes of you ...' (ET, 143)

After this conversation, a convergence of primal events unfolds. On returning to the party, they encounter Roland, who rocks back and forth in the long grass. In an attempt to make him greet Ciaran, Nina secretly pinches him on the arm, to which the child does not react. When Roland levitates in full view of the drunken party, Nina herself hallucinates during this phase in which he perches high up on the branch of an old apple tree. She recalls:

'As I stared, it seemed as if the whole tree became flowing and sinuous, that it shifted and wavered, the bark coiling upwards, the branches turning back on themselves

towards Roland. In the dark, the outermost leaves and twigs seemed forked and flicking, as if the serpentine mass was imploding on the child'. (ET, 146)

If Roland inhabits an underworld of fear, then Ciaran may be viewed as redolent of a muse, maenad, or Orphic poet who attempts to return him to the upper world of the normative.

Unlike Nina, he communicates gently with the child after the episode, and successfully persuades him to allow him, Ciaran, to bring him to bed. When Ciaran describes how the child points fearfully at his bed, refusing to get into it, Nina's response is lacklustre, and she now believes she cannot convince any doctor about the situation. Ciaran responds uncompromisingly:

'Come on sweetheart, you're an articulate lady. You'd better find the words. Stop making excuses.' (ET, 149)

The second space in which a divergent incident occurs is during the family outing some days later to an artistic, European circus. The ring-master/illusionist Tadeus Magnifico, invites Roland into the circus-ring, urging him to 'balance' on a large soap bubble. The circus tent may be regarded as both interior and exterior, interior as a covered space in which events transpire, but in an exterior, non-domestic setting. But Roland's apparent levitation is clearly no optical illusion, but an *actual* levitation beyond the control of the perturbed, observing ring-master:

'... his smile froze, his eyes betrayed puzzlement.' (ET, 177)

The ultimate locus of tragedy is the Elysian Grotto. It too is outside the domestic or rational, although, like Nina's home, it also represents an interior in which specialised forms of seeing and witnessing occur. Mother and son have attained maternal-filial closeness of a kind never

before experienced between them and Nina invites Roland to accompany her to the near-complete grotto. In these revelatory minutes, she is seen as the parent she *could have been*:

‘My heart swelled with love at that moment, as my son’s eyes honoured what was beautiful . . . We were bewitched, my son and I, by that shimmering corridor. I inspected, he admired, his fine fingers threaded through mine.’ (ET, 184)

But unknown to her, Roland is about to be ‘claimed’ by the gods, if we follow the idea of a heroic child being offered an eternity in the Elysian Fields. At the fatal moment when a stalactite snaps, plummets towards Roland’s skull, her efforts are too little, too late. The stalactite kills him instantly. The space of the restored grotto becomes the transformative site within which Roland dies, having moved from the interiority of home, Elysium, to this creative exterior space restored by his mother.

After his death, speaking in the language of myth, Nina longs to return to the moment prior to his death, and by referring to the world of myth and fable, is seen to be still too submerged in that world to address her own failures. Although her desire to go back in time is sincere, this is a bittersweet realisation on her part that, as mother to Roland, she responded to his needs too late:

‘There he was, my truest love, and only then did I see him as he was. He should have had *unicorns with pearly horns as pets*, he should have been raised by *a knightly father and an honourable mother*.’ (ET, 185, my italics)

The challenge in concluding this novel was to suggest a possible redemption for Nina. This concept is embedded in my consciousness, from the childhood idea of God being all-merciful no matter what the sin, combined with my interest in the work of Flannery O’Connor. In a structured narrative that sees serious abuses of a child occur at the hands of its mother, I was

conscious of the question of whether or not Nina's actions could be redeemed. Ultimately, instinct drew me to imagine redemption, whether 'soft' or 'hard'. Flannery O'Connor's forms of character redemption adopt a less pliant route. For example, in her story 'The Lame Shall Enter First', Sheppard, father to Norton, fatally ignores his own son in favour of the delinquent Rufus, whom he adopts. In this story, just as in ET, awareness and revelation may be redundant. In O'Connor's work, Sheppard realises too late that something terrible has befallen his grieving son as a consequence of Rufus's malignant influence. Likewise, in ET, Nina's moment of joyful union with her son comes too late, and he dies in a moment of devastating tragedy.

I wanted the surface narrative to lead towards eventual redemption and moral recovery for Nina and to allow her partial release from the underworld of grief. With that in mind, I purposely extended the book beyond the originally planned ending of December 8<sup>th</sup> (the Feast of the Immaculate Conception), and created a December 9<sup>th</sup>, a non-religious day. One final episode is added in which redemption might be possible, but only through the pagan/Dionysian aspect of immersion in river water (as opposed to what might have been a Christian/Apollonian rite the previous day, December 8<sup>th</sup>)

Part of Nina's redemption can be seen in her decision to sell her home, where she enters a satisfactory liminal situation by signing it over to psychiatrist John Holmes as a half-way house for psychiatric patients. The moral turpitude of her behaviour in the domestic space is potentially cleansed by this positive action. An extension of the point of liminality however, circles back to a meditative exterior action which 'commemorates' Roland. Encouraged by Holmes, who accompanies her to the Liffey riverbank, they remove all clothing and confront one another naked, then enter the water and invoke Roland's name in a final cathartic act.

Nina knows that the animal self is a precursor to religion, (in that our physical selves precede and run before the development of a spiritual aspect) and is not only equal to the mystery of her existence and troubled temperament, but may be key. In a pagan ritual of water, she calls out 'Blessed be my life!', and may be on a path to self-forgiveness; and as both she and John Holmes call out, finally, 'Blessed be Roland!', they reconnect with a heroic paganism, and with Roland's life. Active remembrance through ritual integrates human nature at this point, and there is no division between animal and spiritual self. The Dark Self referred to earlier in this essay has finally been exorcised by transformation in an exterior space in which Nina is literally and metaphorically removed from both the Elysium that was her home, and the site of creative restoration that was the Elysium grotto.

## 1.5. Conclusion

ET is concerned with the questions of how humans live and survive in the context of *space*, of *belief* and of the *irrational*. They may be physical beings themselves, inhabiting physical spaces, both interior and exterior. They may also be viewed as physical bodies, but importantly, with a spiritual dimension that is challenged by an accompanying web of secular ideas on the part of Nina and Neil. This challenge makes it necessary for them to consider that what is called the ‘irrational’ may have validity and agency within their lives. The book also represents a quest for emotional survival from within the conscious and sub-conscious interiors or spaces of Nina’s past and present. Damaged in childhood, visionary even then, and standing outside the safer remits of normative experience, she reaps a harvest of loss in adulthood through tragic behaviour which fails to mediate with the irrational when confronted with it. The growth of her illumination and understanding arrives too late for either her or her child. My hope is that the novel’s conclusion offers a perspective on the light and darkness that inspires as much as it diminishes human experience.

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